

## Learning and development journeys towards effective communications with children

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# **Lefevre, M. Learning and Development Journeys towards Effective Communication with Children**

## **Abstract**

There are continuing concerns about the quality of social workers' communication and engagement with children. This has led to a focus in England on whether qualifying courses prepare students sufficiently for practice. Whilst research has uncovered the capabilities social workers need to engage and communicate effectively with children, there has continued to be limited evidence in relation to which pedagogical approaches might best enable students to develop capability. This paper attempts to address some of this deficit by reporting in-depth case study findings from a larger longitudinal study into the factors which supported a cohort of students in England in learning to communicate with children. Case analyses are presented in respect of two participants whose learning journeys were emblematic of many in the cohort. Their trajectories draw attention to the significant role which pre-course experience with children can play in the development of students' self-efficacy and in providing a rich source of experiential learning which can be built upon. Suggestions are made for how qualifying courses might provide alternative experiential learning opportunities, including role-play, child-observation, and opportunities for reflection on pre-course experience with adults to help students establish the transferability of their learning.

## **Keywords**

Communication and child care social work

Child care policy and practice

Methods and practice

Social work education

(6995 words)

# **Learning and Development Journeys towards Effective Communication with Children**

## **Introduction**

There can no longer be any doubt of the importance to children and young people of effective communication and engagement by their social workers. Participatory research methods have enabled children to describe the benefits of receiving information and explanations about their situations which have been tailored to their age and understanding, and of being helped to explore and express their thoughts and feelings about complex and sensitive matters (*et al*, 2013). Such approaches can enable children to start to make sense of their lives and emotions and to express their views about situations which concern them (Morgan, 2011). Whilst it is important to children that practitioners are efficient in carrying out tasks, it is the manner of social workers' engagement with them which is often of highest concern: they want practitioners to show that they like, respect and understand them, and to be on their side (Leeson, 2007; Winter, 2009). This is not just a matter of preference: children in care, for example, who are on the receiving end of sensitive, attuned, relationship-based practice, tend to have much better outcomes (McLeod, 2010).

Social workers need to be ready to practise effectively at the point of qualification if they are not to transgress children's entitlement to support and participation and disadvantage them. It is known, however, that practice in a number of countries has, at times, fallen short of these standards (see, for example, Clare & Mevik, 2008; Health Information and Quality Authority, 2013; Hughes, 2014). Criticism of the quality of social workers' face-to-face contact with children has been particularly trenchant in England, coming not only from research (Horwath, 2010; Oliver 2010; Morgan, 2011) but from serious case reviews (Ofsted, 2011), service inspections (Commission for Social Care Inspection, 2005), and government-funded inquiries into the state of child protection (Laming, 2009; Munro, 2011).

Inquiring into whether social work education was part of the problem, a select committee (House of Commons, 2009) and a national Social Work Task Force (2009) concluded that students were insufficiently prepared by their courses for practice. This led to reform of the qualifying curriculum, with courses in England being re-structured to ensure graduating

students meet the standards set within a 'Professional Capabilities Framework' (TCSW, 2012). Concerns remain, however. A recent government-initiated independent review of the education of children's social workers (Narey, 2014) has criticised qualifying social work education in uncompromising terms and has recommended further change.

At the time of writing, the Chief Social Worker for Children in England is consulting widely regarding the knowledge and skills thought to be necessary for child and family social work in order to set out a qualifying curriculum (Department for Education, 2014). Re-analysis of the findings of a systematic review (Luckock *et al*, 2006) has already made it possible to establish the key capabilities which practitioners might need to draw on to communicate and engage effectively with children of all ages, developmental stages, abilities and cultural backgrounds, and across the diverse roles, settings and contexts within which encounters might take place (Lefevre *et al*, 2008). These Capabilities for Communication with Children (abbreviated here as the CCwC-framework) underline that effective practice has three dimensions: knowledge and understanding about children and how best to work with them ('Knowing'); the development of skills and techniques ('Doing'); and 'use of self' which is rooted in well-developed values and personal qualities ('Being') – see Table 1.

However, there has been little evidence as to which pedagogical approaches are most effective in enabling students to develop these capabilities (Luckock *et al*, 2006). A recently published prospective longitudinal study I conducted sought to advance understanding by inquiring into the factors which had supported a cohort of students in my university in learning to communicate with children (Lefevre, 2013a). That study enabled the students' learning processes to be mapped, offering a model for a structured and integrated approach to the learning and assessment of this topic (see Lefevre, 2013b). This paper considers in more depth the learning journeys taken by two of the study participants through their social work course and into qualified practice. Through this lens, it examines the differing levels of experience, confidence, capability and motivation students may bring to qualifying social work education and the implications of these for the kinds of learning opportunities which courses might need to offer if they are to enable students to develop their potential.

*Table 1 The framework of Capabilities in Communication with Children (CCwC-framework)*

<b>Knowing Knowledge and understanding</b>	<b>Being(i) Values and ethical commitments</b>	<b>Being(ii) Personal qualities and emotional capacities</b>	<b>Doing Skills and techniques</b>
<b>Knowing about.....</b>	<b>An ethical commitment to....</b>	<b>Being able to....</b>	<b>Proficient in....</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Child development</li> <li>• Effective models, approaches and methods for communicating with children</li> <li>• How (adverse) experiences affect children's communication</li> <li>• The purpose of communication in context</li> <li>• How the social work role and task impacts upon communication</li> <li>• The impact on communication of any of the child's inherited traits, capabilities or impairments</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Children's competence and right to participate</li> <li>• Eliciting and taking into account children's views and concerns</li> <li>• Anti-oppressive practice (e.g. re. power, race, ethnicity, culture, gender, sexuality)</li> <li>• Respectfulness</li> <li>• Reliability and consistency</li> <li>• Providing uninterrupted time</li> <li>• Maintaining confidentiality where possible</li> <li>• Providing information and explanations</li> <li>• Non-judgmentalism</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Recognise, manage and use one's own feelings (and counter-transference)</li> <li>• Show own humanity - expressing enthusiasm, warmth, friendliness, humour</li> <li>• Be sincere, genuine, congruent</li> <li>• Be open and honest</li> <li>• Be empathic</li> <li>• Work with depth processes in the work not just surface ones</li> <li>• Be comfortable to work with children's strong feelings</li> <li>• Be playful and creative</li> <li>• Help children feel safe and build trust with the worker</li> <li>• Engage and build relationships with children</li> <li>• Be caring and demonstrate concern for/to children</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Child-centred communication</li> <li>• Going at the child's pace</li> <li>• Use of play, symbolic, creative, non-verbal and expressive techniques</li> <li>• Using a variety of tools (e.g. ecomaps)</li> <li>• Interviewing techniques</li> <li>• Listening</li> </ul>

## Methodology

The study followed a cohort of 28 students at an English university through their two-year Master's qualifying social work course in England. The majority were female, white British, aged under 37 and without a disability. As fuller details of the methodology are presented in Lefevre (2013a) only brief details will be provided here.

Qualitative and quantitative data were collected at five time points (T1-T5). Data collection at the first four time points broadly followed a pre-test post-test design. T1 was at entry to the course. T2 data were collected just prior to three sessions taught by me in the second term of the course, which focused on developing students' skills in communicating and engaging with children, using the CCwC-framework as a guide. T3 data were collected just after these three sessions, and included students' subjective feedback on teaching and learning approaches used. T4 data were collected at the end of the course and included students' subjective feedback on

how they thought learning opportunities before and during the course had contributed to the development of competence.

Measures of self-efficacy and 'applied understanding of the CCwC' were also taken at T1-T4. To obtain self-efficacy scores, the participants were asked to rate their current confidence in being able to communicate effectively with children, using an established scale from 0 indicating 'no confidence' to 10 'very confident' (Holden *et al*, 2002). Students were asked to provide at each time point written responses to a vignette I had designed depicting a practice scenario with a family which included both a younger child (aged 5-7 years) and a young person aged 14-15. Including children of different ages maximised the opportunity for students to demonstrate their understanding of the variety of approaches needed for children's varied levels of comprehension and verbal ability. Participants' answers were analysed according to the CCwC-framework to see whether they demonstrated the student's awareness of each of the dimensions. The overall score for 'applied understanding' at each time point represented the number of dimensions demonstrated (from 0-32). Each student was assigned a unique identifying number so that responses could be tracked and compared over time. By analysing T1-T4 scores both individually and collectively, it was possible to uncover any changes in students' understanding. Table 2 provides a summary of the data collected at each time point and the numbers of students participating.

Individual interviews were conducted at T5, 17 months after completion of the course, with five students who were working post-qualification in children's services settings. Interviews were semi-structured, beginning with an open question designed to enable participants to reflect narratively on how their learning journeys had prepared them to communicate with children in qualified practice. Further questions then inquired into specific factors which had helped participants to feel more confident and competent. All five participants had been sent a summary of their T1-T4 data in advance to facilitate their reflections. The interviews were audio-recorded, fully transcribed, subjected to thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) and coded using NVivo v8. Interviewees were asked to verify their transcripts and to provide feedback on the data analysis.

*Table 2 Summary of data collection*

Time points for data collection		Methods	N° providing data	% of cohort n=28
<b>T1</b>	Beginning of the 6 term programme	Questionnaires: demographic data; self-efficacy scales; applied awareness of CCWC-framework	25	89%
<b>T2</b>	Early in term 2, just before the sessions on communication with children	Questionnaires: self-efficacy scales; applied awareness of CCWC	27	96%
<b>T3</b>	3 weeks later in term 2, just after the sessions on communication with children	Questionnaires: self-efficacy scales; applied awareness of CCWC; feedback on the focused sessions on CWC	18	64%
<b>T4</b>	The end of the programme	Questionnaires: self-efficacy scales; applied awareness of CCWC; feedback on how whole programme contributed to learning	22	79%
<b>T5</b>	17 months after the end of the programme	Interviews: reflective narratives on the learning journey	5	18%

For the case analyses discussed in this paper, data at all five time points were collected from two interviewees, here termed ‘Melody’ and ‘Sarah’ for the purposes of anonymity. This integrated analysis of the data enriches understanding of what a course might need to provide to enable quite different students to become ‘practice-ready’. Like the majority of cohort members, Melody and Sarah were white, British, female, without children and not disabled. However, their trajectories through the course diverged markedly. Melody was one of a sub-group of participants who had had ‘quite a bit’ of pre-course experience with children in their personal and/or professional lives, had rated themselves with relatively high self-efficacy T1-T4, and whose demonstration of applied understanding had been lower at the beginning of the course, but then increased. Sarah was in a sub-group of students who had had little pre-course contact with children, but whose lower than average self-efficacy T1-T4 contrasted with their average or higher applied understanding scores at those time points. Melody and Sarah were selected for case analysis because each could be seen as emblematic of a type of student in the cohort. Without seeking to generalise from these two cases, they do flesh out in more detail

some of the broader findings among the wider group of students studied with similar profiles or trajectories.

Ethical approval was obtained through the university's ethical research governance process first for the T1-4 questionnaires and later for the T5 interviews. Participants were provided with information sheets and required to sign a consent form at both stages. T5 participants' consent forms included agreement to their interviews being recorded and transcribed, so their words could be used in any of my subsequent publications as long as the guidelines regarding anonymity were preserved. Melody and Sarah read and commented on drafts of these case analyses.

### **Melody's learning journey: building on solid foundations**

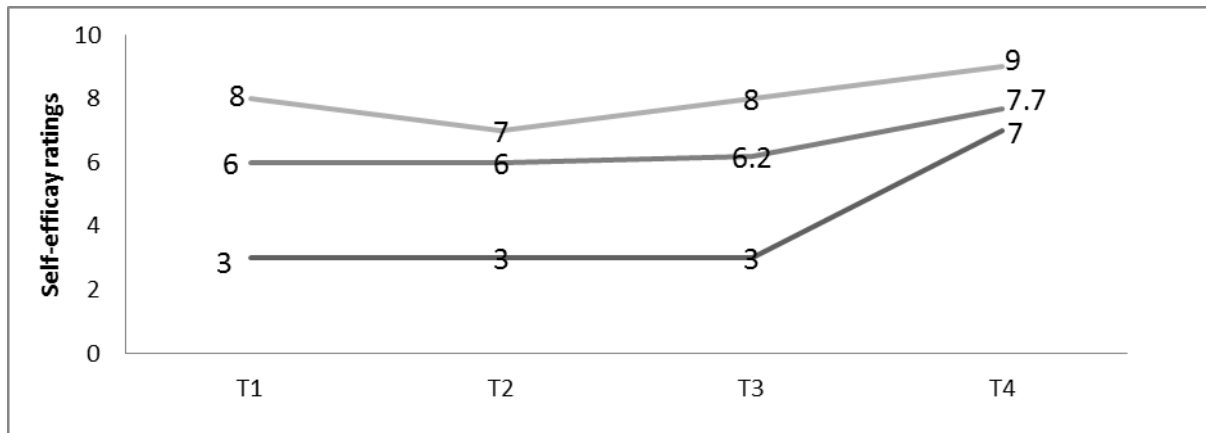
Melody was in the younger student age group (22-26 years) when she started the course. She had worked previously as a teaching assistant with children with emotional and behavioural difficulties and as a community family worker providing family support. These roles had enabled Melody to discover that she had an aptitude for face-to-face work with children. Knowing from this that she wanted to work with children in the future, she had argued for two placements in children's service settings to ensure she was fully prepared for her post-qualification role. After qualifying, Melody had worked in a local authority family support setting, a role which offered her a reasonable amount of direct contact with children.

### ***Particular strengths and learning needs***

During her T5 interview (15 months into qualified practice), Melody reflected on her self-efficacy and applied understanding scores through the course. The trajectory they mapped was one which fitted with Melody's own perception of her learning journey. Figure 1 indicates Melody's high sense of self-efficacy.

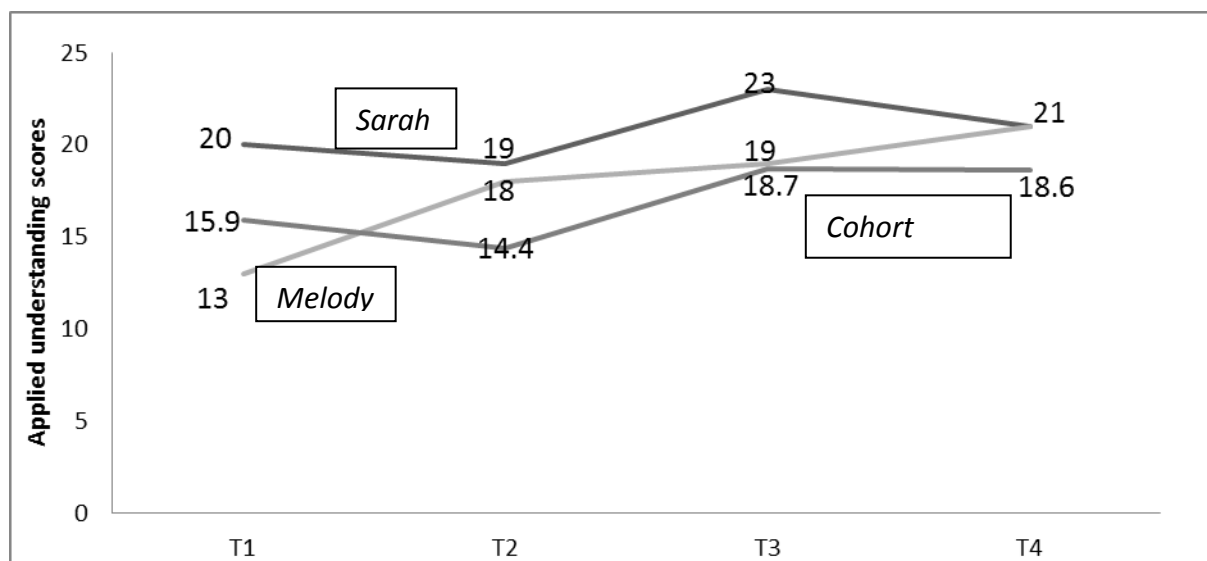


*Figure I - Melody and Sarah's self-efficacy ratings compared to the cohort mean*



The increase in her applied understanding score from 13/32 (at T1) to 21/32 (at T4) (see Figure II) reflected, Melody felt, the development of her knowledge and understanding over that time, which had been sparked by a combination of relevant reading, curriculum teaching, placement experiences and reflection on the learning these engendered. She pointed to how her vignette responses developed in detail and complexity, moving from simple references to basic and generic capabilities in T1-T3 to richer discussions of specialist role-related capabilities at T4. She attributed this development to her practical experience gained in placement.

*Figure II - Applied understanding scores of Melody, Sarah and the cohort mean*



Melody's vignette responses across T1-T4 signalled particular strengths in aspects of the 'Being' domain of the CCwC-framework, most particularly in relation to personal qualities and emotional capacities. Her responses showed that, even at entry to the course, she was aware of her desire to 'rescue' which could risk her becoming 'too involved' and losing focus, or feeling frustration at uncaring or abusive parents. Although at T5 the *"part of [her] that wants to rescue the children from having to go through that type of thing"* was still present, her increased self-awareness and capacity to reflect and contain herself (Ruch, 2013) meant she was more able to *"offer children a safe space to kind of explore that stuff"*. At T5, Melody found that a rescuing 'voice' still came up inside her when she encountered distressed children, but she had learned the importance of just 'being' with a child, to create a safe space:

*...sit back, let there be silence, let there be crying, not having to fill it and allowing her to have that space.*

Melody's capability grew through development in all three domains of the CCwC-framework. Her capacity for empathic attunement (Stern, 1985) and containment (Bion, 1962) – her 'Being' qualities – was supported by her theoretical understanding ('Knowing') of such psychotherapeutic concepts. Her skills in listening, observing and attending ('Doing') was initially developed through counselling/interviewing skills training in the first term of the course, which had taught her that *"you don't have to fill silences, they are important"*. They were deepened through a child observation exercise in the second year of the course: a modified version of the Tavistock model (Briggs, 1992) which comprised five sessions of observing an 'ordinary' child, supported by reflective seminars. Melody had additionally undertaken individual counselling whilst on the course. She described how, by working through unresolved personal issues, she had become more able to recognise and attend to her own emotional reactions. Enhancing her self-awareness in this way had allowed her to become more emotionally 'present' to others and less likely to become overwhelmed by empathic distress (Grant, 2014).

Melody's personal qualities and beliefs about what was important in work with children were in tune with principles of relationship-based practice (Leeson, 2007; Winter, 2009; McLeod, 2010):

*I think what I feel most confident with is my ability to relate to them and hope that I'm demonstrating genuineness because I genuinely love communicating with them... That's why I do the work really. And I can feel really emotional about it as well sometimes.*

She continued to hold to this ideal 15 months into practice, even when the restrictions of an over-proceduralised practice context challenged it, even when she was being told by a senior colleague, 'there's no room for relationships in our work'. Having such a personal ethical commitment is recognised to be one of the key contributors to practitioners persisting with attempts to engage and involve children (Thomas & O'Kane, 2000). Supporting this where it exists already and instilling it where it does not is likely to be an important factor in facilitating high quality direct work with children.

Such qualities and ethical commitments appeared to be already present in Melody in a nascent form at the start of the course. Melody considered that these had originally been generated not only through her previous practical experience with children and personal traits, but also from life experiences, which had underpinned her 'conviction that every child has a right to be a child'.

Melody's poorest scores for applied understanding were for ethical principles such as participation, anti-oppressive practice and children's rights. Seeking to explain their omission at T5, Melody attributed this to her ethical ideals being embodied and out of awareness, influencing her work in an intuitive and unconscious way. While this may have been the case, Melody's instinctive focus did seem to be more on support and understanding than rights-based or anti-oppressive principles. In this she was similar to most members of her cohort. Like many social workers they conceptualised and related to children almost solely as developmental and vulnerable 'becomings' rather than as also competent and capable 'beings' (Uprichard, 2009). It might be important for courses to consider how to bring the latter more to life.

### ***The most important contributors to Melody's learning***

In both the T3-4 questionnaires and T5 interview, Melody described experiential learning opportunities as having been most useful to her, most particularly pre-course experience and

reflections on this, role-play, practice learning, and tutor modelling. Her pre-course work-based experience had enabled her to build a solid foundation of practical proficiency in engaging, playing and talking with children in diverse contexts, and provided her with a rich source of experiential learning upon which she could inductively draw and reflect, both in curriculum-based and practice learning. This sense of her embodied proficiency (Broadhurst & Mason, 2014) had been responsible for Melody's high self-efficacy rating at T1 (8/10). She had, however, scored quite low at entry to the course for applied understanding of the CCwC-framework (13/32, compared with 16/32 for the cohort mean). In her interview she reflected that this was likely to be because she had not yet learned how to name much of what she intuitively felt and deployed.

Melody's self-efficacy rating dipped slightly at T2 to 7/10. This contrast with her substantial increase in the number of CCwC dimensions evidenced at T2 (18/32) was a pattern noted with several students in the cohort. Melody remembered how she had felt quite de-skilled at T2, which came just before the three sessions on communication with children, in the second term of the course. Having just begun placement and written several essays, she had started to recognise that there were gaps in her understanding and that communication with children within the social work role required specialist knowledge and skills which she had still to develop through the remainder of the course:

*I felt possibly like it was this big thing that we have to do and ... almost the more you learn possibly, for a while, the more deskilled you feel. You don't know about the world of communicating in various ways with children prior to doing the course and then, when it's opened up to you, you feel a little bit deskilled finding your feet, before you start to consolidate that learning.*

Practice learning had also made a crucial contribution to Melody's development of capability:

*My first placement was with [an independent foster care provider] and whilst I didn't do a huge amount of adult social worky stuff, I did a lot of direct work with kids, more of a support worker role, and it was just absolutely brilliant working with foster kids. Whether it was going on trips with them and just having those chats or actually doing life story work with children, I did that.*

Even though such work might not conventionally be considered 'social work', it had provided exactly the foundation for future effective practice that Melody needed. The two placements with children and families for which she had successfully argued afforded her different roles settings in which to broaden her experience. While the first placement had brought lots of opportunities for engagement and communication with children, the second, in a statutory children's services Duty and Assessment Team where she mainly carried out initial assessments, did not. In this it reflected the picture reported elsewhere of limited direct contact with children within statutory roles and settings (Horwath, 2010; Munro, 2011).

Melody generally found role-play exercises unsettling and difficult, but she had nonetheless valued opportunities on the course both to role-play herself as a child and to act out her work with a child on placement. These had worked, she felt, because a safe enough space had been created by the tutors for the students to take risks and experiment:

*That space where, you know what, I can fuck up, and nobody's going to judge me. I can say the worst thing ever and it can be really nicely challenged in a way that's constructive. So it's like we need all of those things that we're saying that the children need, so that respect, that safe space, the genuineness and being able to say what you need to say, what you want to say.*

Melody emphasised the importance of educators always creating such a safe, accepting and containing reflective space for learning:

*I think that if that safe space isn't there, there are parts of us that we will repress, you know, maybe thoughts that we have that are a bit un-PC or whatever, that might exist that we then just push away because it's not safe enough. So, "you know what, I think this" and it might be really controversial, and the only way to challenge that is in a seminar space where it's okay to do that stuff.*

## **Sarah's learning journey: from terror to delight**

Sarah had been in the older student age group (27-36) when she started the course and had had no pre-course experience with children either through work or in her personal life. She did,

however, have ten years' experience in social care work with adults. Early in the course Sarah had been unsure about working with children post-qualification, but this had changed by the end of the course because her placement in children's services had given her the opportunity to develop her skills and confidence. After qualifying, Sarah worked in a statutory sector 'long-term' team with children who were in care or subject to a child protection plan. Direct engagement and communication with children was central to this role.

### ***High applied understanding but low self-efficacy***

Sarah's applied understanding scores were higher than the cohort mean throughout (see Figure II) and, at entry to the course, she scored highest in the cohort. This seemed surprising, given her lack of experience with children, but it seemed she had been able to draw sufficiently on what she had learned about communication from her social care experience with adults to hypothesise in the vignette exercise how to work with a child. As transferable as that learning clearly was, it did not, however, instil a sense of self-efficacy: at the first three time points her self-ratings (3/10) were substantially lower than the cohort mean (see Figure I). Reflecting on this during the T5 interview, Sarah attributed her low confidence to having started the course without proven practical proficiency in communication with children – she expected that her competence would be low:

*Having come from having had no experience prior to babysitting the odd one or two children as a teenager, it was incredibly daunting considering working in a professional capacity with a child or children within a family.... My second placement was working in a children and family team. I was bricking it before, absolutely bricking it. I can remember being absolutely rubbishy scared about the damage I'd inflict on small children!*

By the end of the course, however, Sarah's self-efficacy score had substantially increased (to 7/10), which she attributed to discovering in placement that she could engage well with children. Over the T1-T3 time period Sarah had believed that her lack of experience meant she also lacked knowledge and understanding about how to work with children; she was surprised to learn at interview how high her vignette scores had been. She suggested that it would have

been helpful to have been told at the time she had more knowledge than she assumed, as this might have helped assuage her fear and uncertainty and build her confidence.

Whereas Melody and many others in the cohort showed a steady development of applied understanding in their responses to the vignette exercise from T1 to T4, Sarah did not. Although her applied understanding score increased at T3 (just after the sessions on communication with children), it had dropped a little by the end of the course (see Figure II). At T5 Sarah attributed this lack of progression to dissatisfaction with the vignette exercise and feeling anxious about what to write. It seems this uncertainty stemmed at least in part from Sarah's way of conceptualising children and her work with them. She did not intuitively think about children in the abstract; unlike Melody, for example, she did not find propositional child development knowledge from teaching or books helpful to inform her approach. Sarah preferred to develop an understanding of the whole child with whom she was to work on the basis of that child, rather than on her own expectations and assumptions about children in general. It was clear that, by 16 months into qualified practice at T5, her approach (and very real strength) was to form an interpersonal, unique engagement with each child, characterised by caring, ethical practice ('Being' qualities). A hypothetical exercise, such as the vignettes, was not capable of uncovering Sarah's strengths:

*No. 'Cos I think each of my children ... I don't know ... they are complete individuals and I could write until the sun goes down, if you gave me those now I could write huge essays, but without knowing an individual child I found it really difficult to picture a child to think what their experience would be like... I couldn't see a [theoretical] child in my head to think about how they would be feeling.*

### ***Key contributors to learning***

In the T3 and T4 questionnaires, Sarah cited the three sessions on communication with children as having been important to her learning. At T5 she described how they had provided her with strategies to use in working with children and helped put the work in a purposeful work-based context. The role-play exercises had been the most significant contributor to Sarah's learning, because they had helped to put her in touch with the world of children and had demystified for her the process of how to communicate with them:

*I really enjoyed that kind of connecting with what my experience was as a child. It doesn't actually feel like it's that long ago and thinking about children, empathising with a child's experience, I suppose, was really helpful. And about how actually you don't need to have masses of qualifications to be able to just play with a child. And the same kind of principles and ethics around working with adults apply to children... you translate that differently depending on the age of a child maybe. I was complicating the idea of communicating, I think, and once I stopped doing that and I listened to other people's experiences and thought about my own...*

Reflecting on her own experiences as a child also helped Sarah identify what would count as good communication and engagement by a social worker:

*The more I work with children the more I think about the adults that were around in my life when I was a child, and what made me warm to them, what made me feel comfortable around that and what didn't. It's not rocket science but there's some really basic stuff that goes on there about 'okay, why did I really like that person when I was a child?', and wanting to recreate that when I'm with children.*

Recognising and Developing her own capacity for playfulness had enabled her to engage with children:

*.... just being able to really enjoy play, and I think some of my most constructive experiences with children to date professionally have been when we've got into the zone together and are just really enjoying each other. I've not necessarily been a child in that experience but I've really enjoyed experiencing their childness.*

Like Melody, Sarah was disappointed that the opportunities for direct practice with children in a statutory placement had not been as rich as she really needed them to be:

*I probably felt more confident about children after that [second] placement but not hugely more confident and I certainly didn't feel a lot more experienced. I*



*felt like I understood a lot more about what the process might mean for a child but my hands-on experience of working with children hadn't developed a huge amount I would say.....it's only now after 16 months' experience of really working a lot with children [post-qualification] that I forgot how little time I spent with children in my second placement. But at the time, because I had no experience working with children, any experience of children I think I thought at that point in time it was a lot.*

Sarah, like Melody, described the child observation sequence she had undertaken in the second year of the course as having been particularly influential. It had offered a safe and reflective opportunity to engage with a child's experience through 'Being' rather than 'Doing' (Briggs, 1992):

*...it was just really helpful being able to be around a child in an okay way, there weren't alarm bells ringing or children in tears or anything like that... I could feel safe because I wasn't having to directly face that child in the same way, or those uncomfortable moments around that child when he wanted to talk to me or whatever.... I remember having so much fun on the last observation, I just loved it.... that really helped my confidence both in terms of entering a child's world and my reaction to being in that child's world and what that meant for me, and how I saw that child and what was going through my head. But it was a paced, measured way, it wasn't you were thrown to a situation and someone's observing you with a child and suddenly you can't do anything.*

This was particularly useful to Sarah because she had not previously had opportunities just to play and be with children, to learn about their ordinary lives:

*... from that I was then able to explore the feelings and just kind of think what children do, actually that it's not a mystery or they don't all do their own magical thing, they just do what I normally do each day and get up, go somewhere, hang about, talk to their mates, each some lunch, do some work and go home. Their world and my world aren't so different that I couldn't enter theirs, not with ease, but they aren't little aliens! [laughs]*

Whilst the course had met many of Sarah's learning needs, it was really only the beginning of her development as an effective communicator with children; the journey of learning was continuing on into qualified practice:

*I was aware that I was under-skilled but I kind of knew the areas. I could identify where I was under-skilled, there was a developmental pathway for me I suppose.... What I did know from the course was what I didn't know, and that was extremely helpful, so I knew what good practice with children meant theoretically, and that has underpinned my work so far.*

Taking stock, 16 months into practice, Sarah was pleased to recognise that she had made much progress in both her confidence and capability:

*I certainly feel like working with children has been demystified for me now. I very much thought of adults as being separate entities and children being separate entities, and actually you could say that each have quite distinctive separate needs. But actually I think the more I've worked with children the more those boundaries have blurred and I don't get that sense of 'arrgh, I'm talking to a child now' or 'I'm talking to a parent now', because it can sometimes even feel like you're talking to an adult as a child and a child as an adult. .... not feeling as if I'm like I'm with a small person and I don't know what to do now. That disabling kind of fear that I think that I probably had when I first started.*

While Sarah had a reasonable sense of self-efficacy by T4 and scored highly on applied understanding throughout her social work training, she recognised at T5 that she had been still at quite an early stage in her learning journey at the end of the course. Studies elsewhere have indicated that supporting the learning and development of newly qualified social workers makes a significant impact on confidence in the first year of practice (Carpenter *et al*, 2010). This research suggests such support will be particularly important if early career practitioners are working in contexts which do not value time spent with children or provide emotional support for staff (Ruch, 2013).

## Conclusions

The role played by pre-course experience with children in this study is striking. It provides a rich source of experiential learning which appears to promote practical proficiency and an early sense of self-efficacy. Even where students have developed effective communication skills through work with adults, a lack of prior experience with children may mean the thought of working with children engenders trepidation, and might even cause some to avoid practice learning opportunities with children. Encouraging students to acquire some form of work-based contact with children prior to starting their social work course should mean they have had the opportunity to encounter children in a less pressured setting and can develop proficiency in communication and engagement without being distracted by complex tasks such as child protection assessments. Prior experience with children would also mean that curriculum teaching about children (for example, on child development or methods and skills) would not be solely abstract: following Kolb (1985) students would be able to bring theory and research findings to their concrete experience of real children, enabling them to conceptualise how best to work with children in the future. A further potential benefit is that students might develop a clearer idea of which sector to work in post-qualification. This should support them in making a more informed choice regarding placements and other opportunities for specialism during the course.

In the absence of such pre-course experience, experiential learning opportunities in the taught curriculum, such as role play, may be particularly beneficial. Tutors need to provide a safe learning space so that students feel able to take risks and can explore the complex feelings that play sometimes evokes. Formal child observation exercises can offer a window into the lives and ways of children, without the simultaneous challenge of having to do something with that child. This is also a valuable method for developing reflective practice (Briggs, 1992).

A noticeable essence threaded through both students' responses at all time points was their prioritisation of forming caring and trusted relationships with children, based on warmth, genuineness and openness rather than skills and techniques. The impression was given that this essence is part of *who the students are*, seemingly related to factors such as personality, attachment security, internal object relations, emotional intelligence and resilience. As they appear to provide a foundation for 'use of self' in practice (Urdang, 2010), such qualities might

be looked for and considered at admission. If their personal essence is to be a support in their work with children rather than a hindrance, courses will need to offer space for students to learn about themselves, develop relational capabilities and resolve loss (Kinman & Grant, 2011; Ruch, 2013; Grant, 2014).

Students are sometimes able to negotiate two placements in children's services as Melody did. If the first of these were focused towards direct work with children, perhaps in a non-statutory setting, this could provide a basic foundation of proficiency. Students could then focus more in the second placement on communication within the statutory social work role. Such a suggestion calls to mind the ongoing debate in England as to whether qualifying courses should become more specialist and focus on preparing students for specific aspects of social work in child and family settings (House of Commons, 2009; Narey, 2014). Certainly students like Melody believe they benefit from two placements in children's services settings. However, Sarah, whose first placement was in an adults' service setting, was ultimately not disadvantaged in her development of either self-efficacy or applied understanding. Indeed, 15-16 months into qualified practice, both students were similar in their confidence, commitment and enjoyment of direct practice with children, and had benefited from the additional opportunities for specialisation offered by a continuing professional development course in the first year after qualifying.

Given this, the following interventions might be more appropriate. Firstly, pre-course experience, with either children or adults, might be made a requirement, as this can give students a better idea of the personal learning pathway they need to develop through their qualifying course, and afford them the initial self-efficacy and practical proficiency to make best use of the course learning opportunities. Secondly, applicants who intend to work with children in the future might be encouraged to gain experience with children prior to their social work course to help build an element of specialism within generic training. Thirdly, all students should be provided with reflective opportunities to identify the transferability to other settings of capabilities developed in communication with people of different ages, abilities and backgrounds. Such a requirement for pre-course experience does, of course, buck the trend in England of no blanket admission requirement for pre-course experience. Perhaps this in particular should be reconsidered.

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